

**Thomas Jefferson to Reverend James Madison,
January 31, 1800, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson
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Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.**

TO BISHOP JAMES MADISON J. MSS.

Philadelphia, Jan. 31, 1800.

Dear Sir, —* * * I have lately by accident got a sight of a single volume (the 3d.) of the Abbe Barruel's *Antisocial conspiracy*, which gives me the first idea I have ever had of what is meant by the Illuminatism against which “illuminate Morse” as he is now called, & his ecclesiastical & monarchical associates have been making such a hue and cry. Barruel's own parts of the book are perfectly the ravings of a Bedlamite. But he quotes largely from Wishaupt whom he considers as the founder of what he calls the order. As you may not have had an opportunity of forming a judgment of this cry of “mad dog” which has been raised against his doctrines, I will give you the idea I have formed from only an hour's reading of Barruel's quotations from him, which you may be sure are not the most favorable. Wishaupt seems to be an enthusiastic Philanthropist. He is among those (as you know the excellent Price and Priestley also are) who believe in the indefinite perfectibility of man. He thinks he may in time be rendered so perfect that he will be able to govern himself in every circumstance so as to injure none, to do all the good he can, to leave government no occasion to exercise their powers over him, & of course to render political government useless. This you know is Godwin's doctrine, and this is what Robinson, Barruel & Morse had called a conspiracy against all government. Wishaupt believes that to promote this perfection of the human character was the object of Jesus Christ. That his intention was simply to reinstate natural religion, & by diffusing the light

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of his morality, to teach us to govern ourselves. His precepts are the love of god & love of our neighbor. And by teaching innocence of conduct, he expected to place men in their natural state of liberty & equality. He says, no one ever laid a surer foundation for liberty than our grand master, Jesus of Nazareth. He believes the Free masons were originally possessed of the true principles & objects of Christianity, & have still preserved some of them by tradition, but much disfigured. The means he proposes to effect this improvement of human nature are “to enlighten men, to correct their morals & inspire them with benevolence. Secure of our success,

sais he, we abstain from violent commotions. To have foreseen, the happiness of posterity & to have prepared it by irreproachable means, suffices for our felicity. The tranquility of our consciences is not troubled by the reproach of aiming at the ruin or overthrow of states or thrones.” As Wishaupt lived under the tyranny of a despot & priests, he knew that caution was necessary even in spreading information, & the principles of pure morality. He proposed therefore to lead the Free masons to adopt this object & to make the objects of their institution the diffusion of science & virtue. He proposed to initiate new members into his body by gradations proportioned to his fears of the thunderbolts of tyranny. This has given an air of mystery to his views, was the foundation of his banishment, the subversion of the masonic order, & is the colour for the ravings against him of Robinson, Barruel & Morse, whose real fears are that the craft would be endangered by the spreading of information, reason, & natural morality among men. This subject being new to me, I have imagined that if it be so to you also, you may receive the same satisfaction in seeing, which I have had in forming the analysis of it: & I believe you will think with me that if Wishaupt had written here, where no secrecy is necessary in our endeavors to render men wise & virtuous, he would not have thought of any secret machinery for that purpose. As Godwin, if he had written in Germany, might probably also have thought secrecy & mysticism prudent. I will say nothing to you on the late revolution of France, which is painfully interesting. Perhaps when we know more of the circumstances which gave rise to

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it, & the direction it will take, Buonaparte, its chief organ, may stand in a better light than at present. I am with great esteem, dear sir, your affectionate friend.